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BEOWULF 1598, 1996, 2026; USES OF THE IMPERSONAL
VERB GEWEORþAN

Each of the three passages, Beowulf 1598, 1996, 2026, illustrates a different and rather distinct use of *gewearþan* as an impersonal verb. It is the object of this note, not so much to discuss the various interpretations that have been proposed for these passages, as to assemble the material that may help to an interpretation. A careful consideration of the context, in each case, leads to a fairly sure inference of the general idea expressed by the impersonal verb and its adjuncts. It may be expected, then, that some of the interpretations proposed by Beowulf scholars will find support in the material here collected. I have no new interpretations to suggest differing from those given by many of the later editors and annotators of the Beowulf; I have endeavored rather to present material that may furnish a sure basis for a correct interpretation of the passages.¹

I

I consider first line 1598. The line with context, 1594b-1599, reads as follows:

Blonden-feaxe
gomele ymb gōdne ongeador spræcon,
þæt hig þæs æbelinges eft ne wēndon
þæt hē sige-hrēþig sēcean cōme
mārne þēoden, þā þæs monige gewearþ
þæt hine sēo brimwylf ābroten² hæfde

Here it is evident that the impersonal verb is used with the accusative of the person and the genitive of the thing. In illustration of this passage I begin with examples in which the meaning of the verb is plain and unmistakable.

þā gewearþ þām hlāford and þām hyrigmannum wiþ ānum peninge. Thorpe, *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica* (1834), p. 68. Here the meaning is plainly, *agree with, make a bargain with*. The dative expresses the parties to the agreement. The following example has the dative to express the parties to the agreement and the genitive with a clause to express the thing agreed upon: *gewearþ*

¹ Cf. Hall, J. L., Johns Hopkins University Circulars, Vol. 6, pp. 32-33.

² MS. abroten.

him³ and þam folce on Lindesige ānes, þæt hī hine horsian scolde and syþþan ealle ætgædere faran and hergian. Chron. 1014 (Earle, 151.1).⁴ When both parties to the agreement are expressed by the same word the accusative seems to be used: Ac swīþe hradlice þæs þe hī þæs geworden hæfde. Chron. 918 (MSS. Cott. Tib. B. I. Cott. Tib. A VI).⁵ The verb may also express agreement, not between opposite or contending parties, but agreement or concord among friends or those of the same party, resolution to do a thing. Here we find the accusative of the person and the genitive of the thing; and gewearþ þā senatos him betweonum gif hie mon þridan siþe oferwunne þæt mon ealle Cartania towurpe (Igitur cum senatus delendam Carthaginem censuisset) Orosius,⁶ 210,15. Compare Orosius 178, 7, where the verbal expression translates *decreverunt*.⁷ Similar to these examples, in expressing consensus of opinion, resolution,⁸ is the following:

þa gewearþ ūsic þæt wē woldon swā
drihten ādrifan, of þām dēoran hām
Satan 256-7

Old Saxon has the same construction, expressing the same idea; for example,

thea gumon alle giward
that sie ina gihōbin te hērōston
gikurin ina te kuninge
Heliand 2883-5

A consideration of the context of Beowulf 1599 in the light of the material brought together above makes it apparent that the idea expressed by the impersonal verb is *consensus of opinion*. "Many agreed in thinking (It was the opinion of many) that the seawolf had destroyed him."

II

Ic þē lange bād
þæt þū þone wæl-gæst wihte ne grētte
lēte Sūþ-Dene sylfe geweorþan
gūþe wiþ Grendel. 1994b-1997a.

³ Cnut.

⁴ *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, Oxford, 1865.

⁵ Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, London, 1861, Vol. I, p. 193.

⁶ Sweet, *King Alfred's Orosius*, London, 1883.

⁷ Cf. Oros. 208, 28; 280, 20.

⁸ The idea of determination, resolution by a single person seems to be expressed in the following:

In this passage the impersonal verb is used with *lætan*. As far as the impersonal verb is concerned, we might consider this as an example of the use discussed above, where we have the parties to an agreement expressed by the accusative, and the thing agreed upon (or concerning which an agreement is made) by the genitive, a use well illustrated by Orosius, 204, 23, *pā hīe nānre sibbe gewearþ* (Latin, *sed infecto pacis negotio*). The expression in Beowulf 1997 might, then, be translated, "I long besought thee to let the South Danes themselves come to terms in the war against Grendel." This is Sievers' interpretation;⁹ he proposes the translation, "Du solltest die Süd Dänen selbst über die bekämpfung Grendels einig werden lassen." We find, however, that these two verbs (*geweorþan lætan*) are used together in Middle English, Middle High German, Mittelniederländisch, and Modern Dutch; it will be well, therefore, to consider this idiom in these languages in connection with Beowulf 1997, which affords, I believe, the only example of its use in Anglo-Saxon.

In Middle English the idiom is rather common; I give below some examples: Marthe haveþ hire mester, leteþ hire iwurþen, Ancren Riwe, p. 414. He lette þe kyng al yworþe and to Rome aȝeyn drowȝ. Robert of Gloucester, p. 67.

Loue hem and lakke hem nouȝte, late god take the veniaunce
Theigh thei done yuel, late thou god y-worthe

Piers Ploughman B. 6, 227-8.

For-thi I conseille alle the comune to lat the catte worthe
Pr. Pl. B. Prol. 187.¹⁰

In all these passages the meaning plainly is, *let one alone, leave the matter to one*.

For the idiom in Middle High German, see Benecke und Müller, *Wörterbuch*, where the following examples are given, *lāzent in geworden: überlasst ihn sich selbst, lasst ihn in ruhe*, Erlösung 6038. *Swie du sie niht geworden lāst*. Erlösung 5147.

Cosijn, *Anteckeningen op den Beowulf*, p. 30, calls attention to the expression *laten geworden* in Mittelniederländisch¹¹ and

pā gewearþ þone weregan

.

þæt he costode cyning alwihta Sat. 669.

⁹ Paul und Braune, *Beitr.* 12, 97.

¹⁰ Cf. Pr. Pl. B. 6, 84; C. 11, 163. For other examples see Maetzner, s. v. *gewurþen*, 3.

refers to Verdam, *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek*, II, 1890. Verdam gives as equivalents in Modern Dutch, *laten begaan*, *laten geworden*, *laten betijen*, *zijn gang laten gaan*. Among the quotations illustrating the idiom are the following: *Laet mi metten doden gewerden, ic salne doen wreken*. *Lanc.* III, 13673. *Laet mi selven ghewerden* *Pass.* W24d. *Wat God wille doen metti laet hem ghewerden wat si* *Dyst. Cat.* II, 12. *Dat wi Gode ghewerden laten ons selfs ende alre dinc* *Rusb.* 2, 195.¹²

A comparison of these examples from Middle English, Middle High German, and Mittelniederländisch¹³ with the expression in *Beowulf* leads, I believe, to the conclusion that the idiom in question was in use in Anglo-Saxon, and that we have an example of it in *Beowulf* 1997. That we have no other examples in Anglo-Saxon is probably purely accidental; the frequent use of the idiom in Middle English shows this. We are justified, then, in proposing, as Cosijn¹⁴ does, as a translation of this passage, "that you leave to the South Danes themselves the war against Grendel" or "that you let the South-Danes alone in their war against Grendel."

III

Sio gehāten [is]
geong, gold-hroden, gladum suna Frōdan;
[h]laf̥ þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,
rices hyrde, ond þæt rād talaf̥,
þæt hē mid þy wife wæl-fāhþa dæl
sæcca gesette. 2024b-2029a.

I consider last *Beowulf* 2027,

hafaf þæs geworden wine Scyldinga.

The nearest parallel to this in Anglo-Saxon is *Andreas* 307,

hū gewearþ þē þæs, wine lēofesta,
þæt þū sǣbeorgas sēcan woldest, etc.

In this passage the verb is plainly impersonal, with accusative of the person and genitive of the thing followed by a clause. We

¹¹ "*Geweorpan lētan*, *laten begaan*, niet tusschen beide komen, is volkomen mnl. *laten geworden*."

¹² Compare with the last two examples the quotation from *Piers Pl.* given above.

¹³ Modern Dutch also has the idiom, *iemand laten geworden*, *to let one alone, to let one have his own way*.

¹⁴ "*Dat gij de Zuid-Denen zelve den strijd tegen Grendel liet uitvechten*" (*Anteek.* p. 30).

may, therefore, infer that the parallel passage in *Beowulf* has the same construction. As far as I am able to discover, these are the only passages in Anglo-Saxon that show just this construction. The idiom is well illustrated and its meaning clearly shown in Old High German. There are four examples in Otfried.

Thiu hiun warun filu fró, *giwerden mohta siu es thó*
sie habetun thár selbon krist ther alles blides furista ist.

II, 8, 9, (Marriage at Cana)

Wola thaz githígini thaz nóz tho thaz gisfdili
thia súazi sines múases *giwerden mohta sie thes*.

IV, 9, 20 (Christ eats the passover
with his disciples.)

So sie thar tho gázun thie in themo gráse sazun
ioh mannlih thar sát ward, so *sie thes brótes giward*.

III, 6, 44. (Feeding of the five thousand)

Thie langum ziti krist gisáh, ioh ouh selbo zi imo sprah
ob inan giwurti thaz er heil wurti?

III, 4, 19, (Healing of the man at the pool of
Bethesda).

Graff, *Sprachschatz* I, 992, puts the first three of these cases under the strong verb *gawerdan* (angels. *geweorthan*, alts. *giwerthan*), with the remark " 'mih gawirdit thes' gehört doch wohl hieher." Kelle in the glossary of his edition of Otfried has the following: *giwirdit* [st. v.], *es lüsted*; ich habe a) Verlangen; b) Freude; c. acc. der Person und a) gen. der sache. II, 8, 9,: die Brauteute bei der Hochzeit von Kana konnte dessen gelüsten, sie konnten ihre Freude daran haben, dass Christus in ihrer Mitte sass. IV, 9, 20; die Jünger konnten erfreut, stolz darauf sein, dass sie mit Christo assen. III, 6, 44; wenn sie nach dem Brode Verlangen trugen. III, 4, 20. ob ihn gelüstete dessen, ob er darnach Verlangen trüge.

Piper, in his *Glossar*¹⁵ gives the following: *giuuerdan st. v. unpers. mit Acc. d. Pers. es verlangt mich nach, ich habe Freude an*; a. mit dem Gen. d. S II, 8, 9. IV, 9, 20; 3.s. praet. i. III 6.44.-b. mit abh. Satze: 3.s. praet. III, 4, 20. Schade, *Altdeutsches Wörterbuch*, p. 277, has: *giwërdan ahd., mhd. geworden st. v. abl. 1 unpers. m. Acc. u. Gen. gefallen*: mih giwirdit des Zu wërd *dignus*. Wackernagel, *Altdeutsches Handwörterbuch*, p. 110, has, *gewërdën, gewerthen, ahd. giwerden, stv. unpersoentl. m. acc. u. gen. gefallen; zu wërt*.

¹⁵ Piper, Paul, *Otfrieds Evangelienbuch*, II Theil, 1884, p. 579.

All this plainly establishes, for Old High German, as the meaning of the idiom under consideration, *it pleases me, suits me with respect to this; I desire it*. In the want of examples in Anglo-Saxon sufficient to establish clearly the meaning of the idiom, the evidence from Old High German becomes of great significance for the light it throws upon the passages from Beowulf (l. 2027) and Andreas (l. 307) quoted above. In view of this, I suggest as a translation of Beowulf 2024b-2029a, "She, young, gold-adorned, hath been promised (betrothed) to the gracious son of Froda; *this hath pleased the friend of the Scyldings*, guardian of the realm, and he counteth it good policy, that he with the woman hath settled many feuds, strifes." It will be noticed that the translation suggested does not differ essentially from that already proposed by several editors and translators; but what I have brought together here establishes, I trust, this rendering on firm ground.

For Andreas 307-310 I suggest, "*How hath it pleased (suited) thee*, dearest friend, that thou, deprived of treasure, wouldst seek the sea-hills, the bounds of the ocean-currents, over the cold cliffs approach a ship."

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